

## CRITICAL NOTICE

## Plotinian Studies in the Anglophone World

Eyjólfur K. Emilsson, *Plotinus*. 2017. London and New York: Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-415-33349-8 (pbk). £ 20.99.

E.K. Emilsson's *Plotinus* is a welcome addition to the number of introductions to Plotinus that are currently on the Anglo-American market. It fills a gap between O'Meara's user-friendly *An Introduction to the Enneads* (1993) and Gerson's philosophically sophisticated *Plotinus* (1994). Whether it will come to replace the two early introductions in English to which even the most seasoned of Plotinians like to return from time to time remains to be seen: Armstrong's authoritative *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study* (1940, reissued in pbk 2013) and Rist's engagingly written *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (1967).

One merit of E's book is that it works at different levels. To philosophy lecturers/professors in the Anglo-American world who want to introduce their charges to the philosophy of the *Enneads*, it provides a mostly dependable teaching aid. To philosophers desirous to enlarge - or to deepen- their understanding of the Platonic tradition, it provides a store of detailed arguments. To specialists in ancient thought, it gives a refreshing, if sometimes contentious, outlook on familiar themes. If E.'s *Plotinus* works at these different levels, it is mainly because it meets the expectations of philosophical audiences in the analytic tradition, as broadly conceived. In plain and unadorned prose, mostly devoid of technicalities, E. deals with the major strands of Plotinus' philosophy in a readily understandable order, giving pride of place to the dissection and reconstruction of the arguments of his notoriously difficult author while taking care also to record some of the scholarly and philosophical debates to which they have given rise. He excels at the task, especially when dealing with subjects on which he has made his reputation, Plotinus' metaphysics and epistemology. His occasional comparisons of Plotinus' views with those of later authors, particularly Descartes, Leibniz and Kant, will be of considerable interest to philosophers. Given the inevitable limitations of space that even the most enlightened of publishers impose on authors of introductions, E. has wisely eschewed discussions of textual cruces and ambiguities. He takes the text of the *Enneads* as it is given in Henry and Schwyzer's *editio minor*, relies on Armstrong's translation, which he sometimes unobtrusively modifies, and, for the most part, follows the traditional Enneadic order. Although himself a published translator of several Platonic dialogues, E. has made his book entirely accessible to Greekless readers. For all these reasons,

his *Plotinus* would usefully complement such introductions to Plotinus and Neoplatonism that take the form of readers: Dillon and Gerson, *Neoplatonic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (2004) and Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: a Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism* (2005), both of which are made up of introductory notes and comments on selected key passages (in English translation) of the *Enneads* and later Neoplatonic texts.

Having first provided his readers with basic information on Plotinus' life and times, E. devotes his second chapter ("The World according to Plotinus") to an overview of the ontology of the *Enneads*, in which he introduces the hypostases, their procession and emanation, the double-act theory, the principle of prior possession, the top-down concept of causation and the presentation of the soul's reversion to the higher hypostases as the ultimate goal of human life. Turning next to Plotinus' style and terminology, both of which are notoriously hard to get accustomed to, E. sets to work in earnest on making the most basic concepts of the *Enneads*, such as that of soul, understandable to his readers. No doubt because he is aware of the shadow that "Australian materialism"<sup>1</sup> still casts over today's philosophy students (as well as some, at least, of their instructors), E. anticipates their likely question: "is what Plotinus calls 'the soul' the same thing as what philosophers would later call 'the mind'?" To set them right, he makes two points. He shows first that in developing his own conception of the soul, Plotinus adapted, or reacted to, a concept that he had inherited from his philosophical predecessors; while Plato and later Platonists conceived of the soul as the principle of life (at both the individual and the cosmic level), Aristotle and the Peripatetics in general presented it as the form of body, inseparable though distinct from it, and Classical Stoicism defined it as a kind of corporeal entity. He explains next that while the soul, as Plotinus conceived it, is a multi-level hypostasis whose main emanative function is the generation and governance of the physical cosmos, it is not, even so, ineluctably turned downwards to the world of sense, but always remains part of the intelligible world. This committed him, in turn, as E. demonstrates in a later chapter, to a particularly complex version of soul-body dualism according to which body, to the extent that it is in soul, is to be sharply distinguished from matter, which Plotinus consistently presented as the ultimate principle of negativity at both the cosmic and the ethical level.

Turning next to Plotinus' style of philosophizing, E. argues that he does not contradict himself as often as he is commonly alleged to do and that whatever inconsistencies can be found in the *Enneads* are, to an extent, due to Plotinus' need to rely on discursive and therefore inevitably tensed language to describe the timelessness of emanation and the non-discursive nature of the thinking of Intellect and the undescended soul. While this is true enough, there are other factors, that E. does not mention, which have to be considered when assessing the overall consistency of Plotinus' views and pronouncements.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., D.M. Armstrong. 1968. *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*.

Modestly considering himself to be merely an interpreter of the divine Plato, although not unaware that the views expressed in the dialogues needed adjustments, Plotinus often turned for inspiration to earlier philosophers, notably Aristotle and the Stoics. To combine and contrast their views with his own Platonic stance and commitments, he developed a manner of thinking and teaching that is both dialectical and dialogical. His manner is dialectical insofar as the protracted polemics that he often engaged in with his predecessors and/or contemporary opponents tended to result in debates taking the form of detailed objections and replies, retorts and rejoinders following each other in quick succession. Since he rarely identifies his opponents by name, often preferring to refer to them by way of allusions, and since, as we know from Porphyry, his poor eyesight made him reluctant to re-read his texts after first composing them, it can be difficult for modern readers, who approach the tractates some eighteen centuries after their composition, to discern who claims what.<sup>2</sup> Not infrequently, Plotinus' partner in discussion is himself and the to and fro of argument is a dialogue that the discursive element in the soul carries with itself, occasionally leaving it implicit or unsaid which side of the argument is finally to be endorsed. Plotinus' style is dialogical insofar as his interactive style of teaching often led him to engage in lengthy question and answer sessions with members of his audience (see Goulet-Cazé, 1982). During these sessions, Plotinus, like any lecturer, sometimes hypothetically entertained the assumptions and viewpoints of the questioner before attempting to undermine or alter them. Lastly, he liked to supplement his own abstract and precise arguments, aimed at demonstrating points of doctrine, with what he called "persuasion" (*peithō*), which relies on qualifiers (*hoion*, mostly), metaphors (see Clark, 2015), concrete examples and a variety of rhetorical devices aimed at securing the assent of the auditor's (or reader's) soul. The looser language of persuasion, as he knew well, inevitably entails a loss of philosophical rigour and precision. To give an example, in VI 8 [39] 13.4-5, after hesitantly ascribing self-mastery to the One, Plotinus seeks to pre-empt the reproach of inconsistency that he suspects might be coming his way by warning the reader that: "now we must depart a little from correct thinking in our discourse for the sake of persuasion." No ancient text, it may be concluded, is more in need of close reading, or indeed of Davidson's principle of charity, than Plotinus' *Enneads*.

Following the two introductory chapters, E. turns to the nitty-gritty of Plotinus' system and embarks upon the task of explaining what are probably two of the most obscure concepts in his philosophy, namely the One and the self-constitution of Intellect. Chapters III and IV, which are devoted to these issues, are the best in the book. The virtue of chapter III lies, not so much in its originality as in the clarity with which E. deals with the issues involved. He relies on the double effect theory, which he had already treated as a cornerstone of the system in his *Plotinus on Intellect* (2007), to highlight the inner dynamism of the philosophy of the *Enneads*. Having identified the premises of

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<sup>2</sup> In a subsequent chapter of (p. 205), E. takes on board this point: 'It is often hard to discern whether Plotinus is fully speaking his own mind or merely working out the consequences of the views under discussion'.

the arguments and uncovered their polemical background, he outlines the steps through which Plotinus reaches his conclusions before dealing with objections likely to occur to a modern reader by going deeper into the system and mostly succeeding in showing its overall coherence. In so engaging with the text of his author, E. wisely avoids the “view from above” approach to the history of philosophy, which, in the heyday of the analytic school, had some authors in the Routledge series deal with the philosophical giants of the past as schoolmasters do with the essays of promising but error-prone pupils. In these chapters, as in his previous ones, E. proves to be a sympathetic reader of his author, ever keen to re-construct his thought so as to make it philosophically cogent. Thus, to explain why it was understandable for Plotinus to make the One the lynchpin of his system, E. presents it as a metaphysical expression of the need, deep-seated in ancient Greek thought, to reduce the diverse to unity by identifying a principle that would enable the bewildering array of appearances to be reduced to unity and thus to be made rational and intelligible. Together with the principle of emanation, the One is Plotinus’ response to this need. Productive power of all things, it is not to be identified with any single one of them; pure transcendence, it is “beyond being,” and cannot therefore be made subject to predication. More significantly even, the One does not think, not even itself, since thinking inevitably involves a duality between thinker and thought. Not thinking, it neither intends nor plans. As E. notes, Plotinus anticipated the obvious objection that his ascription of goodness, self-sufficiency and perfection to the One is at variance with his presentation of it as a principle so self-complete as to make any predication redundant. To forestall the objection, Plotinus conceded that although we cannot *speak* the One, we can “speak *around* it.” As E. interestingly concludes, Plotinus was the first thinker in the Western tradition to introduce the view that there are limits beyond which human thought cannot reach. To reach out to what lies beyond those limits, we may add, Plotinus relied, not only on philosophical thinking, but also on the cultivation of an expectant attitude of mind that would make it possible for him to rise, albeit sporadically, to what lies “beyond” the reach of reason.

The nature of thinking dominates E.’s account of what is arguably the most puzzling and philosophically fragile part of Plotinus’ philosophy, namely the generation of being from the One and of plurality from unity. To explain how the One, although not a creator, nevertheless stands at the origin of all things, visible and invisible, Plotinus relied on two assumptions that he does not justify. First, he posited that the One, in its perfection, eternally overflows and, so doing, generates a product lesser than itself. Inchoate and indeterminate, the product turns to its cause in desiderative contemplation. Unable to emulate the perfection of its source and thus to become unitary itself, the product constitutes itself as a thinking reality or hypostasis, Intellect, which has thought as its object. As E. suggests, Plotinus’ description of the self-constitution of Intellect as a result of a fracture of unity paradoxically highlights a feature which turns out to be a hallmark of his philosophy, namely the identity of being and thinking. The very nature of thinking and thought, in turn, necessarily presupposes the “greatest kinds” of the *Sophist*, which Plotinus re-interpreted in the terms of his own ontology, so as to be able to account for

the interconnectedness of the Forms or Intelligibles (*noēta*) of which Intellect consists. Each Intelligible, while being itself, presupposes all the others. Plotinian Intelligibles, which share many features with Platonic Forms, are the archetypal realities of which the contents of the lower world as well as the categories of human thinking are reflections or images. The Plotinian Intellect, therefore, which eternally apprehends the Forms of which it consists as a *totum simul*, achieves, not only a perfect adequation of knower and known and thus self-knowledge, but also a level of self-sufficiency second only to that of the One.

Unsurprisingly, the complexity of the subject, added to the difficulties of the texts themselves, makes the generation and self-constitution of Intellect one of the most debated aspects of the philosophy of the *Enneads*. To ease the reader's entry into these debates, E. wisely chose to proceed by means of a detailed, point by point, textual commentary (of V I 4.26-41), which is as clear as anything that can be found elsewhere on the subject. Amongst the difficulties are *cruces* arising from the texts themselves, in which the challenge is to reconcile such discrepancies as may be discerned between various accounts of the self-constitution of Intellect, from inchoate overflow to fully-fledged hypostasis. Second are more explicitly philosophical problems arising from Plotinus' description of the thinking of Intellect as a direct and non-complex apprehension of the Forms. Since Intellect apprehends the Forms all together as a *totum simul* and its thinking cannot for that reason be described as discursive, the question arises as to whether it can still be regarded as propositional, as Sorabji *contra* Lloyd has argued. Last, comes the question as to why Plotinus made Intellect, the thinking reality, the first stage of emanation to proceed from the One. The generally accepted answer, which E. endorses, is that it was in part reaction against the Middle Platonist conception of the Platonic Forms as thoughts in the divine mind. Plotinus, who found the view incompatible with his unitary conception of the One, presented the Forms as thoughts of Intellect, as it emanates from the One. However, as John Dillon has successfully argued, Plotinus was no innovator in this respect since the view that he is generally credited with introducing into the Platonic tradition had in fact already gained currency by the end of the second century AD.<sup>3</sup> It was presumably because the issue had remained still live over a century later that Plotinus wrote tractate V 5 [32] (*That the Intelligibles are not Outside Intellect, and on the Good*), in which he argued, in the face of opposition from Longinus and Porphyry, that the Forms, far from being outside Intellect, are identical with it.

In chapter V ("Soul") E. sketches the background for the detailed examination of the soul that will occupy him in the following two chapters. The emanative process, he explains, involves several

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<sup>3</sup> By that time, under the (probable) influence of Atticus and Numenius, Dillon (2011) writes, "the problem was beginning to arise: is the Creator God in whose mind the Forms reside really the highest God, or does perhaps the very fact of his intellection, comporting as it does something of a duality, preclude him from the radical unity that should be characteristic of a supreme deity?"

levels of soul, from the world-soul to nature, each more pluralised than the one that precedes it in the hierarchy, until the process reaches exhausting point with the production of matter. Since all souls are manifestations of hypostatic soul, they share the same form and are therefore aptly named “soul-sisters,” who differ from each other only in their respective functions and powers. E. provides an account of *sympatheia* which, though succinct, is just about adequate to account for Plotinus’ conviction that all souls, being sympathetic to each other, provide the animating principle that keeps the cosmos unified. Readers seeking more information on this puzzling notion will find it in Gurtler 1988 or indeed in E.’s own, more recent, essay of 2015. On the subject of Plotinus’ version of the duality of soul and body, dedicated Cartesians will be pleased to learn that E. no longer subscribes to the view that Plotinus was the first Cartesian.<sup>4</sup> In the present volume he treats his readers to a few useful pages on the two thinkers’ respective views on extension, consciousness and the relatedness of soul and body (pp 178-179 and 217-218). The issue crops up again later in the volume when E. situates Plotinus’ views on the relationship between the psychic and the bodily within the framework of modern-day theories of the mind-body problem. These pages, which fill a gap in recent secondary literature on Plotinus, are to be welcomed as exceptionally lucid and thorough. On the problem of the self-temporalisation of the soul, an issue on which Plotinus’ overall consistency is hard to defend, E. does his best both to account for, and to deal with, the difficulties of the texts. That he does not quite succeed is due mostly to the space constraints inevitable in an introductory volume. Karfik (2012), who gives the most comprehensive and thorough account to date, had over thirty densely printed pages at his disposal.

Chapter six, devoted to *The Physical World* opens with an admirably clear treatment of the genesis of bodies and the currently hotly debated issue of Plotinus’ concept of matter/evil. Holding that although each of the three tractates devoted to the issue has a specific focus, E. argues that Plotinus’ account of matter is nonetheless “quite uniform” insofar as it presents no evidence that he changed his mind on the issue in the seventeen or so years that he took to complete the *Enneads*. Plotinus, E. explains, is a radical monist for whom matter is not an independent principle, but the last stage of the emanative process that starts from the One. In unreservedly siding with the version of emanation called ‘*émanation intégrale*’ by O’Brien and his many followers, E. effectively erases the Gnostics from this particular chapter of the philosophy of the *Enneads*. As is well known to readers of this journal, the influence of Gnosticism upon Plotinus is currently much debated in the secondary literature, as a result, not only of earlier German scholarship, but also and more importantly, of the Nag Hammadi material, discovered in 1945, and which has recently been translated by Spanu (2012). It would have been interesting to learn what E.’s objections are to those who, in the wake of Turner, Narbonne, Corrigan and Phillips, dispute the monistic version of emanation and find the Gnostic presence in the *Enneads* to be far greater than had so far been generally recognised. Why did E. not enter the controversy? A

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<sup>4</sup> See Emilsson (1988:148).

cautious scholar, ever wary of sailing close to the wind, he may well have judged the current polemics to be too tangled for the kind of treatment best suited to an introductory volume.

Instead of entering the troubled waters of Gnosticism, E. turns briskly to Plotinus' conception of the physical cosmos, most specifically the categories, a subject that is discussed (almost) as much in contemporary scholarship as it was in the ancient world. Although the three tractates that Plotinus devoted to the subject are arid and difficult, they are crucial for an understanding of Plotinus' anti-Aristotelian stance that substances can have no contraries. Indeed, the contrariness of good and evil is a main plank in the arguments deployed by Plotinus to present matter as utter negativity and metaphysical evil. To be sure, E. does his level best for the reader by first providing information on Aristotle's categorialism, which he presents as an ontological rather than a linguistic theory, before turning to Plotinus' critique of it. Unfortunately, the skimpy account that he provides is insufficient to enlighten anyone not already familiar with the issue. What Plotinus does claim, if I understand him, is that Intelligible substances (the Forms) are not subject to predication; each of them, being archetypally what it is, can only be characterised by its own distinctive *energeia*. As for what Aristotle called sensible substances, they are from Plotinus' viewpoint, "shadows on shadows," which, as such, lack the ontological density required to be the bearers of the *praedicamenta* listed in Aristotle's *Categories*. Readers who would welcome further enlightenment on the issue will find it in Lloyd's admittedly demanding 1990 account or, if they can read French, in the pioneering account given by Rutten (1961), who interprets Plotinus' views on the subject as an early form of nominalism.

The next two chapters, devoted to Plotinus' conception of the human being, have E. discuss the notoriously problematic implications of the doctrine of the impassibility of the soul, namely (1) how can the soul in us remain impervious to data coming from the sense organs? How does consciousness of those come about? (2) how can the soul in us remain unaffected by emotions such as anger and fear, which, on most other philosophical accounts, are made dependent on the interaction of soul and body? This is the occasion for a discussion of Plotinus' concept of *phantasia* (which E. felicitously renders as "the power of representation"), in both its upward and its downward function. As was to be expected from a writer who first made his reputation on a study of Plotinus' theory of sense-perception (1988), the account given of the role of *phantasia* in bringing sensory data to the soul is limpid. Through detailed comments on judiciously chosen passages - always a sign of mastery of one's material - E. explains how the soul plays a determining role at all levels of the life of the compound. In the case of sense-perception, this involves assigning a cognitive, hence soul-related, role to the sense organs before a further intervention by *phantasia* brings the percepts so obtained more fully within the remit of the soul, who can then pass judgments on them. As for the emotions, E. continues, they arise as a result of wrong opinions and faulty reasoning on the part of the discursive element of the soul. Can those be corrected and, if so, how? The issue is left to be dealt with mostly in the chapters on ethics. At this

point, E.'s account becomes less interesting than might have been hoped. Eager to convince us that the formation of perceptual judgments does not "generally depend on the unfolding of purely intelligible Forms" (281), he does not take full account of the second element of the disjunct in V 3 [49] 4.1-5, which has Plotinus state that there is a better way for us to be close to Intellect than by having its "laws" written in us, and that the better way is to become, so to speak, "filled (*plērōthentes*) with it and able to see it."<sup>5</sup> As opposed to the first, the second element in the disjunct justifies the claim made at the end of the previous chapter that sense-perception can be for us a messenger bearing tidings of the higher world and therefore that we, too, embodied beings though we are, "are kings when we are in accord with it [Intellect] and thus capable of knowing ourselves." E.'s exclusive concentration on the formation of perceptual judgments also cheats us of his thoughts on *phantasia*, a concept so elusive in Plotinus that it is hard to know whether it consists of two soul powers/faculties, as generally assumed so far, or a single one, as recently argued by Perdikouri (2016).

The chapter on ethics is a mixed bag, as will be appreciated once it is contextualised, both historically and exegetically. In 1996, John Dillon had claimed that:

... the single-minded pursuit of union with god which is Plotinus's only approved form of ethical activity *does not really leave much room* for that concerned interaction with our fellow man which constitutes the traditional arena of ethics.' (323)

Dillon's point, be it noted, was that Plotinus did not leave "much room" for the traditional concerns of ethics, not that he left "no room at all." This did not prevent several scholars working in the Anglo-American tradition from rising to the defence of their author. Thus O'Meara argued that "Union with the One *must* involve sharing in its metaphysical fecundity, its nature as the self-giving and self-communicating Good," a point that he took to legitimate the further inference that "the motivation of the Plotinian philosopher-king *relates to sharing* in the metaphysical fecundity of the absolute Good." (2003:76, italics mine). Remes (2006 and 2007) mounted a sophisticated argument to support a similar conclusion. Other scholars, taking a different track, scoured the *Enneads* and the *Vita Plotini* for scraps of evidence to show that their author, far from discouraging good men and women from interacting "in a concerned way" with their fellow human beings, actively prompted them to do so, through both his writings and his own exemplary interaction with the orphans entrusted to his care.

At this point, readers old enough to remember the revival of Aristotle's virtue ethics in the 1970s, will experience a distinct sense of *déjà vu*. In book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle describes the life of contemplation as the happiest and best life for a human being to lead, having in books I to IX of the same treatise presented the life of practical reason as uniquely fulfilling the human

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent commentary of this passage and indeed the whole of V 3 [49], see Ham (1999).



*ergon* (function).<sup>6</sup> Can the *prima facie* discordant claims be reconciled? For close to twenty-five years the question occupied scholars and dozens of articles were written in support of either the inclusivist or the exclusivist interpretation of Aristotle's ethics. Suppose, to recall an example familiar at the time, that the orphanage across the road is in flames: would a latter-day Aristotle enjoin the contemplator, on the hypothesis that s/he has noticed the fire, to forsake contemplation, if only to call the fire brigade?

That a similar kind of controversy should now be played out against the background of Plotinus' ethical writings is, in a way, unsurprising since the two philosophers hold not too dissimilar views about the best human life and the respective place in it of the practical and the theoretical virtues. However, as E. knows well, there are also significant differences between the two thinkers; while Aristotle comes close to contradicting himself, Plotinus does not; while Aristotle devotes the larger part of his ethical treatises to the practical life, Plotinus does not, choosing instead to concentrate on the contemplative life throughout the *Enneads*. This should have prevented the issue from arising at all. Why did it arise? Is it, as I recently argued (Stern-Gillet, 2014, 399-401), because of the combined impact of the following two factors on the thinking of specialists in ancient thought: (1) the well-documented modern definition of ethics as essentially "other-regarding;" and (2) the lingering influence of the Christian ideal of neighbourly love?<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, could it be that these Plotinian scholars are motivated by some kind of loyalty to a philosopher who, more than others, appears to inspire devotion? Whatever their reasons, theirs is an attempt to graft modern notions upon ancient theories of ethics, to pour new wine in old wineskins.<sup>8</sup> As David Sedley writes of Socrates' ethical stance in the digression in the *Theaetetus*:

As the Digression proceeds, we will see Socrates' picture of ideal philosophical detachment further developed into what has often come over to readers as *advocacy of a callous disregard for his fellow citizens*. The philosopher's interest in broad definitional questions about justice and man, we will learn, make him relatively indifferent to practical questions regarding actual justice between actual human beings. *It is a mistake to try to explain away this prominent feature of the Digression*. That a life of pure intellectual endeavour, or "contemplation," as it came to be known, is superior to one devoted to civic virtue, more godlike, and for these reasons more worthy of the philosopher, was a doctrine which Plato would enunciate at the climax of the *Timaeus* (89d2-90d7), and which his pupil Aristotle would advocate in largely similar terms at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. *It is important that we should try to understand and contextualize this recurrent*

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<sup>6</sup> The problem is excellently set out by David Keyt in an oft-quoted essay first presented at the 1978 meeting of the SAGP in Binghamton and reprinted in *Paideia*, 7: 138–157. Keyt defends the inclusivist position.

<sup>7</sup> For a starkly drawn contrast between the two traditions, see Kierkegaard in *Works of Love* (1847).

<sup>8</sup> Matthew, 9-17 or, as Martial wittily puts it in epigram 8.6, "drink Astyanax in Priam's cup" (*In Priami calathis Astyanacta bibes*).

*thesis of ancient ethics, rather than seek ways of reading the texts that will save our philosophical heroes from saying it in the first place.* (2004, 67-68, italics mine)

The Socrates of the *Theaetetus*, Sedley continues, “is presented by Plato as that doctrine’s harbinger, with his distinction between a lower, civic morality and a higher one of god-like self-distancing.”

Saving his hero from opprobrium appears to be E.’s aim in taking up the cudgels in support of the latter group of scholars. To that end, he appeals to oft-quoted passages in which Plotinus makes virtue respond to the lead of the facts and intervene in practical affairs. In the course of the drawn-out argument that he devotes to the issue, E. puts forward two theoretical claims. First, having stated that Plotinus follows Plato in assigning a political role to philosophers, he points to tractate I 2 [19] (*On Virtue*) where, so he claims, Plotinus expresses the view that the practice of the civic virtues goes some way to making us “godlike.” True, they do, and, true, Plotinus does indeed say so explicitly. But his reason is not quite what E. takes it to be. Plotinus’ reason is that those virtues represent a crucial stage in the ascent of the embodied soul to her higher and better self and that, as such, they fulfil a crucial motivational function. To embark on the process of conversion - or, in modern parlance, to seek to be moral - one needs to have a notion, however vague and ill-defined, of what one is converting to or aiming at. The practice of the civic virtues, which initially stems from “habit and training” rather than thought (I 1 [53] 10), builds self-control and independence from the body, thereby sustaining the soul’s freedom and her ability to turn towards her ontological source. Although most human beings are unlikely to proceed beyond the civic stage, those who do possess the civic virtues are half-way up to the ideal of god-likeness that Plato had Socrates defend in the *Theaetetus*. Such is the reason why Plotinus, in a passage that has received little attention from commentators, criticises as “unreasonable” (*alogos*) Plato’s disparagement of the civic virtues in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.

Second, when E. seeks to reassure his readers that Plotinus, for all his ethical intellectualism, was no advocate of “self-centred egoism” (329), he is appealing to a notion that had no currency in ancient ethics. Rather than seek to rebut the charge, he might more profitably have pointed out that the accusation is based on anachronism insofar as there is no ready match in ancient thought for the modern concept of altruism in its several guises. As for egoism, only Aristotle’s concept of *philautia* arguably comes within shouting distance of it, but the dissimilarities between it and modern notion of egoism are greater than the similarities. Take the Aristotelian concept of self-love, in which two kinds are distinguished in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Self-love the misnomer denotes the vicious disposition that leads one to appropriate the largest part of such competitive goods as are currently available but in short supply; self-love rightly so-called, by contrast, is the virtuous disposition that leads one to follow reason in all things on the understanding that reason is the best and most authoritative part in one’s soul (*N.E.*, 1168b29-69a2). The virtue of the latter kind of *philautia*, Aristotle explains, lies precisely in placing the self, as appropriately conceived, at the centre of the moral life. In this Plotinus’ position is, once

again, close to Aristotle's, as is clear from the well-known passage in I 1 [53] 10, where it is stated that *hēmeis* can refer either to the joint entity of soul and body or to "that which even in our present life transcends it," which is the true self. Partiality to that self, therefore, in Plotinus, as it was in Aristotle, is a manifestation of virtue. This is not to deny - and, so far as I know, nobody has denied it - that although "... it [virtue] would choose to rest from its practical activities because nothing needed its curative action, as if a physician, for instance Hippocrates, were to wish that nobody needed his skill," it would nonetheless readily intervene in practical affairs if and when the need arises.

E.'s analysis of Plotinus' concept of happiness helpfully addresses questions likely to exercise modern readers upon first coming across the puzzling figure of the high-minded Plotinian sage (*spoudaios*), who practises the higher virtues and bears with astounding equanimity what would be for most other human beings acute physical discomfort and mental anguish. And so, the question that arose from Aristotle's eulogy of the theoretical life crops up again in connection with Plotinus' sage: would he be concerned that the orphanage across the road is engulfed in flames? Indeed, he would if, that is, he noticed it. Whether he would go further than that and be on the lookout for occasions to help his fellow human beings is an entirely different matter. Although E. would like to believe that the sage would so do, he is too honest a scholar not to own up to the fact that there is no evidence to support his belief:

Plotinus *may well have believed* that the sage's wisdom, contemplative and practical, makes him *especially* sensitive to facts that ethically require his attention. *Although there is no direct evidence for this in the tractates*, this is compatible with them as is suggested by Porphyry's account of Plotinus himself in the *Life*. (324-25, my italics)

Possibly so, but a third person report is no substitute for direct authorial evidence, especially when direct authorial evidence is lacking ...

To conclude: E.'s painstaking account of Plotinus' ethics makes many a useful point to counteract the negative assessments of it that long remained current. So painstaking is E.'s account, however, that it fails to convey the coherence, the high-mindedness and, yes, the other-worldly appeal of Plotinus' concept of virtue which, when it comes hand in hand with philosophical enlightenment, puts us on the way to the Good. For this reason, E.'s chapter would be best read in conjunction with Pierre Hadot's 1964 semi-popular but persuasive portrait of Plotinus in *Plotin ou la Simplicité du Regard*.<sup>9</sup> Only when these two accounts are taken to balance one another can it become understandable that Plotinus's ethical reflections could exert the powerful influence that they did on many of the thinkers who followed him, from Augustine to the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* via Denys the Areopagite. I shall return to the issue.

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<sup>9</sup> Helpfully translated by Michael Chase under the title of *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, 1993.

E. next turns his attention to Plotinus's mysticism. In the manner of Gerson (1994, 218sq), though less briskly than him, he minimises the significance of mysticism to Plotinus' philosophy: "...the mystical *unification* with the One is *by no means a cornerstone of Plotinus' philosophy*" (336, my italics). Since it is specifically to Plotinus' philosophy that E. wants to restrict the relevance of mysticism, his reserve is justifiable, not to say welcome, for it was Plotinus' reputation as a mystic that long provided analytically-minded philosophers with an excuse for saving themselves the trouble of reading the *Enneads*. This said, would E. deny that mystical union with the One is the true goal of the embodied human soul, as Armstrong, Hadot and many others have claimed? He does not address the issue, preferring instead to raise epistemological questions regarding the stages that the embodied soul must pass through, from higher soul to Intellect to the One, before achieving union. While conceding that philosophical thinking is a preparation for it, he ponders the issue as to whether and, if so, to what extent, the unitive experience, either with Intellect or the One, temporarily deprives the soul of its individuality. While the question, which is infrequently raised in the secondary literature, will be of interest to both budding and seasoned Plotinians, some will regret E.'s reticence on the unitive experience itself, an experience which Plotinus appears to have shared with a variety of authors writing both in the tradition that he contributed to define and in others. This brings me to my last point.

Although E.'s bibliography is pleasingly international, the book itself is somewhat parochial insofar as most of the scholars discussed or referred to in its four hundred and ten pages write in English. Since Neoplatonism remains a minority subject, these scholars are known to each other and form what, at a pinch, could be described as a coterie. Admittedly, far from being the worst offender, E. is more enlightened than most of his Anglophone colleagues, and he must have been mindful of the fact that his audience would include undergraduates. Still, the trend is worrying insofar as it would not be hard to list five recently published monographs on Plotinus containing no mention of studies written in languages other than English. Of E.'s mild parochialism, here are two examples. First, his discussion of mysticism relies on a distinction made by O'Meara (1993:103). Without wishing to question O'Meara's authority on this point or indeed on any other, it might have been more appropriate for E. to refer (defer?) to Hadot's commentary on *Ennead* VI 7 [38], in which twenty pages of sober and elegant French are devoted to an analysis of the defining characteristics of Plotinus' mysticism and to a comparison of it with that of later Western writers. Second, E.'s bibliography contains no mention of the recent French translation, introduction, and notes in nine volumes, carried out under the direction of Luc Brisson and Jean-François Pradeau (Flammarion 2002- 2010). Furthermore, of the collection *Les Ecrits de Plotin*, founded and directed by Hadot until his death in 2010, only three volumes figure in E.'s bibliography. If the experience of this reviewer is anything to go by, no single volume of either collection is ever consulted in vain.

The book is well produced and reasonably priced. The few typos that I noticed are all easily corrected. Possible exceptions are on p. 133, where the reference is circular, and on pp. 164-65, where the quotation from *Ennead* IV 4 32. 4-13 is so truncated as to be practically unintelligible.

To conclude: Prof. Emilsson is much to be thanked for his efforts in bringing the *Enneads* within the orbit of the tradition of analytic philosophy, as broadly conceived. In this daunting task he has almost unfailingly succeeded. Let no one interested in ancient philosophy ignore his book.

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